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# AN ANALYSIS OF LEGAL CANNABIS PRODUCT ADVERTISEMENTS IN COLORADO

GULA, JOANNE

SHEN, JIAXI

MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND CENTER FOR NEW MEDIA

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

PUEBLO, COLORADO

**Prof. Joanne Gula**

**Dr. Jiaxi Shen**

Mass Communications and Center for New Media

Colorado State University

Pueblo, Colorado.

## **An Analysis of Legal Cannabis Product Advertisements in Colorado**

### **Synopsis:**

Over 200 print advertisements for legal cannabis products in Colorado are analyzed in three major cities for recreational dispensaries. A content analysis was conducted using three major publications to find out what incentives were utilized in these print advertisements. These include the use of promotions, visuals, social media, and any means utilized to entice consumers to purchase their products.

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## **An Analysis of Legal Advertisements for Cannabis Products in Colorado**

By

Joanne, Gula, Ph.D., Assistant Professor

Colorado State University, Pueblo, Colorado, USA

Jiaxi Shen, MFA, Assistant Professor

Colorado State University, Pueblo, Colorado, USA

## ABSTRACT

Cannabis was legalized in Colorado on November 6, 2012. It is illegal to advertise dispensaries that sell these products utilizing any electronic source or social media that sends a signal beyond Colorado's borders. However, print advertisements are legal and are utilized by dispensaries in very competitive ways. This paper will examine the print advertisements for cannabis from three cities in Colorado (Denver, Colorado Springs, and Pueblo) that are published in local news magazines. These publications have been collected from July 2015 until January 2016. There are hundreds of advertisements available for analysis. Advertising appeals and incentives will be coded into categories that are used to sell these products. Sellers create many appeals and tactics to entice consumers (e.g.: coupons, apps, discounts, holiday specials, and rewards cards to name a few). The advertisements will also be examined for size, color, visuals, headlines and other design and copy aspects created to attract the consumer's attention and get them to purchase their cannabis products.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a groundbreaking study that analyzes print advertisements from competing dispensaries in newsletters in Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo, Colorado. Promotional techniques and incentives are examined in Pulp, Independent and Westword.

Recreational cannabis was legalized in Colorado on November 6, 2012. Cannabis comes in many brands with qualities offered for a person's needs and wants. It is no longer just marijuana or weed being sold to get high. Brand loyalty and brand equity is commonplace in this new industry. The marketing of these products is just as important to examine, as are any consumer products.

Since legalization, cannabis dispensaries have started operation throughout the state of Colorado. There are medical-only cannabis dispensaries, recreational-only dispensaries, and both recreational and medical dispensaries. These shops are highly competitive, similar to any business that wants to entice consumers to purchase their products.

These dispensaries offer many types of cannabis and related products, include the actual cannabis plant leaves (of which there are many strains), waxes, oils, edibles, drinks, teas, creams and just about anything you can imagine to make you feel better. Selling cannabis has become synonymous with selling beer.

Once beer and cigarette companies had shed the negative associations with their products, they redoubled their efforts to get people to choose their brand over the others. They also worked

increasingly hard—notoriously, in the case of cigarette companies—to broaden their audiences (Vari 2016).

Supporters of recreational cannabis put legalization measures on ballots in several states last November 2016. It has been legalized in California, Nevada, Maine and Massachusetts since then. People in other states are sure to follow. It remains legal also in Washington, Oregon, Alaska, and DC.

Advertisements have been around for centuries. Research has analyzed them for incentives used to attract target markets to consume their products and brands. Cannabis products attracting consumers have also become highly profitable. Since it is illegal to advertise via broadcast, as ads can not cross borders into states where cannabis is not legalized, only print advertisements are allowed to promote these products. These print advertisements were analyzed to discover incentives and promotions used by these dispensaries to entice consumers to purchase their products in their shops.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

“As marijuana becomes a commercial product like cigarettes, soft drinks, junk food and alcohol, consumption is going to go up and the associated health risks are going to go up,” said Stanton Glantz, a professor with the Center for Tobacco Control Research at UCSF. (Fimrite 2016).

Glantz co-wrote a study advocating for stiffer regulations and an accompanying cigarette-like public health campaign. Ideally, he said, a combined recreational and medicinal industry would be run by the state, eliminating pot profiteering, with tax revenue used on prominent ads and warnings discouraging use. In Colorado and Washington, growers, makers of edible products and operators of pot stores are rolling out scores of products, slick websites, elaborate logos, packaging and catchy sales pitches. In Denver Colorado, there is an agency creating public service announcements about the negative aspects of cannabis and underage usage.

Prop. 64 would use tax revenue for marijuana research and keep pot out of the hands of children, but says nothing about discouraging general use of the drug. Prop. 64 places some limits on marketing, with most of the rules seeking to protect those under 21, including a ban on symbols, language, music or cartoon characters known to appeal to young people. Billboards would be allowed, though they cannot be within 1,000 feet of a day care, school, playground or youth center. But things may change, and Prop. 64 opponents have criticized the measure for leaving the door open for such ads — which are permitted on television and radio broadcasts, as well as online and in print, as long as the typical audience is at least 71.6 percent adult.

Amendment 64 makes the private use, and limited possession (up to one ounce) and home-growing (up to six plants) of marijuana legal under Colorado law for adults 21 years of age and older. The law also established a system in which marijuana is regulated, taxed, and distributed similarly to alcohol. The law went into effect on January 1, 2014.

“It’s supercompetitive.” said Olivia Mannix, who in 2014 co-founded Denver’s Cannabrand, which calls itself the world’s first marijuana marketing agency. “There are so many brands now, so if you want to be competitive and have a chance of making it, you sure better have marketing.”

Vashon Velvet, an artisanal grower on Vashon Island in Puget Sound, reaches customers through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The slogan on the elegant packaging reads, “For the pursuit of Happiness.” The plants go by names like Platinum Blueberry, Laughing Buddha and, yes, Acapulco Gold. A brief health warning on packages states that the marijuana inside “has intoxicating effects and may be habit forming (Fimrite 2016).

In the majority of states that have legalized cannabis for medical or recreational use, compliance with advertising laws is the biggest issue. Most states prohibit “open” advertising that exposes minors and other vulnerable members of society to the availability of marijuana. Furthermore, due to the federal classification of marijuana as a Class 1 drug, many mainstream media channels are apprehensive about accepting advertising for cannabis-related products and services.

When commoditization takes place, consumers tend to ignore specific products or brands and select the cheapest or most convenient option available to them. This is particularly true for recreational marijuana dispensaries, whose consumers are typically price sensitive and less concerned about quality, product consistency and predictable effects than medical cannabis consumers. Unless yours is the only dispensary within a certain radius, commoditization is - or

will likely become - an issue. Commodization can be avoided by creating brand awareness and developing brand loyalty with your dispensary.

When cannabis became legal January 1, 2014 in Colorado, there were long lines, a shortage of marijuana, and prices were high. There are now over 380 dispensaries in Colorado, and 480 licensed growers. These numbers continue to grow. There is more competition than ever, and cannabis businesses need to act now to distinguish their brand from their competition (Digital 303).

In Colorado, cannabis prices are going down, profit margins are tighter, and competition is fierce. Therefore, dispensaries need to feature unique products. Dispensaries are allowed to grow, and process their own cannabis. This allows each dispensary to grow designer strains of cannabis that other dispensaries do not have. Many dispensaries run holiday specials with unique packaging. Having products no one else has is something that keeps customers coming back.

Most marijuana edible companies feature marijuana leaves, and other stereotypical images on their packaging. However, Dixie Elixier, based in Denver, is a company that has distinctive branding for its custom line of cannabis infused sodas, chocolates, and other products. Their product packaging is designed to appeal to all consumers Marijuana growers and product producers should ditch the pot leaves, the smoke, and green motifs, and think mainstream branding (Digital 303).

Companies are spending big on packaging that resembles what you find in high-end grocery and beauty stores and pharmacies. They want to expand their customer base.

The marketing of edibles has presented a considerable challenge. Parents fear that cannabis-infused candies, cookies, and other treats could appeal to their kids. And since edible products don't kick in until an hour or more after they're consumed, consumers are sometimes tempted to eat more than is advisable. (The data is spotty but Coloradans legalized medical marijuana in 2000, and for the last decade the state appears to have had a higher rate of marijuana-related emergency room admissions than the rest of the country.) (Halpern 2015).

Before February 1, recreational users could buy a cookie or candy bar infused with 100 mg of THC, the psychoactive chemical in marijuana. The state however considers 10 mg an appropriate dose. Now these edibles must be packaged in such a way that a "reasonable person" can understand how to divide the product into doses of 10 mg or less.

While savvy marketing could help change public perception—and it likely will, just as other adult vices eventually gain acceptance—marijuana marketers face rolls and rolls of legal red tape, Tvert says. “The rules surrounding the marketing of marijuana are really strict, and they really limit the outlets that these businesses have to reach potential consumers.”

A few Denver-based companies are taking on both the regulatory and consumer perception problems of marketing medical and recreational marijuana. They are using savvy marcom

strategies, and heavy doses of creativity, in an attempt to spark the U.S.-based marijuana industry's growth (Birkner 2015).

Because of cannabis advertising restrictions, Cannabrand (a cannabis marketing agency in Colorado started by two University of Colorado/Boulder graduates) steers most of its clients toward industry-related publications that will accept marijuana-related ads, such as *The Cannabist*, *Culture* magazine, *THC* magazine, *Marijuana Business* and *Dope* magazine. Some publications, such as the *Denver Business Journal* and *Westword*, a Denver lifestyle magazine, publish ads for local dispensaries and marijuana products, as well.

PR, rather than advertising, is proving to be marijuana businesses' best bet right now, Mannix says. "PR is the way to go. You can speak with journalists about your brand and get your message across that way, and target specific publications that fit your audience."

To market their own agency, Mannix and DeFalco also rely on ways to prompt word of mouth, using their networking skills and industry knowledge, doing speaking engagements at conferences such as the International Cannabis Association's Cannabis World Congress and Business Exposition, and attending legislative events in Colorado. They were present at the passing of the Limited Social Marijuana Consumption Initiative, which allows for adult cannabis consumption in a public or private space in Denver, including designated smoking areas in bars, and they work with activists and lobbyists on a local and state level, such as the Cannabis Patients Alliance, a group that helps provide patients with information about marijuana and connect them with doctor (Birkner 2015).

Adds Mannix: “We’re not just an agency that’s providing marketing services. We’re also on the ground floor level, and we really care about this industry and helping to drive change.”

Although the twenty something male stoner culture still exists, of course, cannabis marketers are working to shift perception of their customers from those slacker types to a mix of white-collar executives, suburban moms and grandparents. “Yes, there’s always going to be that culture there that’s a fundamental part of why we’re here now, but the reality is, for everybody else who’s over 21 and potential customers, we have to find different ways of talking about it, particularly the experiences,” Sodano says.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the recent push for marijuana legalization is the potential for big brands in the cannabis industry, just like there are big brands in the alcohol and tobacco industries" (Devaney 2015). But, the road to big marijuana brands could be a long one, unless the federal government removes marijuana from its schedule of controlled substances, the USPTO won’t be handing out trademarks for marijuana brands.

Businesses in the cannabis industry can’t claim marketing expenses. And yet, in spite of these many marketing challenges, some companies have tried to create that big, iconic marijuana brand. The future of cannabis advertising is regulated and there are procedures to follow. The alcohol industry self-regulates. They have their own industry organizations that determine acceptable standards. This would certainly be an optimal scenario for marijuana businesses given the history of oppressive laws enacted by the U.S. government in respect to the cannabis plant (Freeman 2016).

The concerns of utmost importance are integrity – advertisements must not be misleading or deceptive to be compliant with FTC regulations. Of secondary concern is the viewing audience who will see the ads. All advertisers want to influence future consumers, but care must be taken to protect future generations from harm (Freeman 2016). The current rule of thumb for the alcohol industry is that 71.6% of the audience must be 21 or over.

With the efforts of lawmakers, such as Jared Huffman, to spur clarification by the DOJ, businesses will be better positioned to make decisions about how cannabis should be advertised and about how to abide by the law. Until then, we are best advised to monitor ourselves to prepare for the future of nationwide legalization (Freeman 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

Newsmagazines were collected from July 2015 through January 2016 from three cities in Colorado: Pueblo, Colorado Springs and Denver. They are Pulp, Colorado Springs Independent and Westword. Pulp is issued monthly, Independent is weekly, and Westword is weekly.

Categories were created to examine tactics that are used by marijuana dispensaries that sell both recreational and medical marijuana to attract customers to their stores to purchase cannabis in its many forms.

All advertisements for cannabis recreational dispensaries were examined and duplicates were discarded. Only original ads appearing once are a part of the content analysis.

Each original individual newspaper recreational cannabis dispensary advertisement was examined for the presence of the categories listed below by the two authors. These were scored in each category per advertisement. Totals were tallied for each of the variables.

Descriptive content of cannabis in these advertisements were coded in numbers. The following nine categories and 37 sub-categories include:

1. Size of Advertisement: these include full page, 1/2 page, 1/4 page, 1/8page, 1/16 page, 2-page and inserts.
2. Promotions: The reference to special incentives to save money or get more of the product.
  - Giveaways (free cannabis items or buy one get one free)
  - Deals
  - Offers
  - Prizes (ability to win a cannabis product or prize if purchasing products)
  - Sales (reduced prices on cannabis items)
  - Rewards (special things given to loyal customers including rewards cards )
  - Early Bird (Arriving at special select times for discounts)
  - Happy Hours (similar to restaurants and bars who provide cheaper items during select times),
  - Coupons (bring in a coupon with an expiration date to receive a special price).
  - Discounts: veterans discount, student discount and Colorado resident discount. This is a promotion how to put in promotions
3. Visuals of Cannabis:

- An actual picture of the cannabis plant or bud.
  - Graphic picture created of the cannabis plant or bud.
4. Social Media used in the advertisement. These include QR Codes, Shopping with your phone for cannabis products, and social media icons (facebook, twitter....).
  5. Holiday Themes:
    - Halloween: Pictures associated with Halloween such as pumpkins, bats, spiders, ghosts and also headlines.
    - Thanksgiving: pictures associated with the holiday such as turkeys.
    - Christmas: pictures associated with the holiday such as Santa Claus, Gifts, reindeer.
    - New Year's: any reference or picture for New Year Celebration.
  6. Bravado: The use of words or awards, such as “ We're the best cannabis”; Slogans and Quotes.
  7. Words related to cannabis: 420, joint, marijuana, cannabis, and hemp.
  8. Appeals
    - Sex: The use of provocative words or pictures of seductive models.
    - Humor: The use of words or images to suggest something that is humorous.
    - High Society: an upper class life style visually being promoted.
  9. Colorado logo appears in the advertisement.

## DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 229 original print advertisements were analyzed in this study. These include 25 ads in Pueblo's Pulp, 71 in Colorado Springs Independent and 133 in Denver's Westword. Researchers

analyzed each newspaper individually and counted the presence of each element. The researchers then computed percentages of advertisements in each category. All three newsmagazines totals were then combined for overall analysis in each category.

In the Pulp (see Table 1), significant results were found for social media (68%), promotions (66.7%) and words related to cannabis (58.3%). In addition, Pulp ads had significance in the social media icons subcategory (68%). However, the use of graphic cannabis pictures are prominent (48%). There are no actual leaf pictures used in Pulp's ads.

In the Independent (see Table 2), significant results were found for promotions and incentives (86.5%), followed by visuals of cannabis (48.1%). One item is significant in the subcategory of deals (60.6%). There are graphic cannabis pictures (38%) and actual cannabis pictures (25.4%).

In Westword (see Table 3) the most significant category is promotions (85%). The subcategory of deals is significant (62.4%). Graphic cannabis leaf comes in at 35.7% while real cannabis pictures are below 20%.

Overall percentages for all three newspaper magazines reveal the following dominant categories (see Table 4). Promotion (83.5%), includes coupons, giveaways, prizes, offers, deals, etc., are significant as the highest main category utilized in these advertisements. Visuals of cannabis (47.3%) is the next highest category, where 18.3% are actual pictures and 37.5% are graphic pictures. Social media elements are present in 32.8% of all advertisements for all three sources,

the majority (32.6%) of these ads use social media icons, while only a very small number of them have QR codes (2.6%) or shopping with your phone function (1.3%).

The highest percentages for the overall sub-categories yielded the following results. Deals are present in 57.2% of ads, graphic leaf cannabis pictures are in 37.5% of ads, and the third highest subcategory is social media icons (32.6%).

Research conducted on how to advertise cannabis dispensaries also suggests the use of Holiday Themes. The researchers feel that this is an important main category with all the sub-categories for each holiday. These make the most visually interesting advertisements.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Examining cannabis print advertisements is an uncharted area. Cannabis advertisements for dispensaries are still infantile because of the recent laws that legalized its use in Colorado and other states. Also, there are strict rules and regulations are required to advertise cannabis that create limitations. Dispensaries are trying different tactics and appeals to entice consumers to purchase their products from their competitors.

Although this is a pioneer study, there are several salient advertising categories for promotions utilized in cannabis advertisements that receive higher percentages. This category includes deals, coupons, offers, sale, etc. Following that, visuals of both graphic and actual cannabis leaves as well as social media are prominent in the categories.

Future research should focus on what effect these advertisements have on consumers to purchase their cannabis products in specific dispensaries. What promotions are effective in these advertisements? Are deals, coupons, visuals, copy, themes and all of the top categories being utilized to entice customers to purchase their products?

It will also be interesting to compare advertisements in different states that are able to legally sell recreational cannabis. Certainly we should analyze more publications in Colorado in different cities in the state.

Trying to link consumer purchases to advertisements will be more challenging. Studies can be set up to analyze consumer reactions to specific ads. Surveys can be conducted asking consumers to rate tactics in advertisements that would motivate them to purchase cannabis products in a certain dispensary.

This field of study is wide open and should present many research opportunities. Even though this present study simply scratches the surface as to what is utilized in these advertisements, there are many opportunities to continue and move forward in this new area of advertisements that is going to expand.

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Table 1

*Percentages of categories and subcategories in Pulp*

Category	Percent	Subcategory	Percent
Size	100	Full page	88
		1/2 page	0
		1/4 page	0
		1/8 page	0
		1/16 page	0
		2-page	12
		Inserts	0
Promotions	66.7	Giveaways	4
		Deals	20
		Offers	12
		Prizes	0
		Sales	0
		Rewards	16
		Early Bird	0
		Happy Hour	12
		Coupons	32
		Discount	28
Visuals of Cannabis	48	Actual pictures of the cannabis plant	0
		Graphic pictures of the cannabis plant	48

Social Media used in the advertisement	68	QR Codes	0
		Shopping with your phone for cannabis products	0
		Social media icons	68
Holiday Themes	32	Halloween	12
		Thanksgiving	4
		Christmas	12
		New Year	4
Bravado	48	The use of words or awards	48
		Slogans	0
		Quotes	0
Words related to cannabis	58.3	420	12
		Joint	0
		Marijuana	44
		Cannabis	0
		Hemp	4
Appeals	20	Sex	12
		Humor	0
		High Society	8
Colorado logo appears in the advertisement	16.7		

Table 2

*Percentages of categories and subcategories in Independent*

Category	Percent	Subcategory	Percent
Size	100	Full page	28.2
		1/2 page	18.3
		1/4 page	31
		1/8 page	15.5
		1/16 page	5.6
		2-page	1.4
		Inserts	0
Promotions	86.5	Giveaways	7
		Deals	60.6
		Offers	1.4
		Prizes	1.4
		Sales	1.4
		Rewards	1.4
		Early Bird	7
		Happy Hour	7
		Coupons	5.6
		Discount	4.6
Visuals of Cannabis	48.1	Actual pictures of the cannabis plant	25.4
		Graphic pictures of the cannabis plant	38

Social Media used in the advertisement	13.5	QR Codes	0
		Shopping with your phone for cannabis products	0
		Social media icons	13.5
Holiday Themes	16.9	Halloween	2.8
		Thanksgiving	4
		Christmas	9.9
		New Year	2.8
Bravado	18.3	The use of words or awards	18.3
		Slogans	0
		Quotes	0
Words related to cannabis	31	420	5.6
		Joint	0
		Marijuana	11.3
		Cannabis	8.5
		Hemp	5.6
Appeals	11.3	Sex	8.5
		Humor	2.8
		High Society	0
Colorado logo appears in the advertisement	1.9		

Table 3

*Percentages of categories and subcategories in Westword*

Category	Percent	Subcategory	Percent
Size	100	Full page	15
		1/2 page	27.1
		1/4 page	28.6
		1/8 page	19.5
		1/16 page	8.3
		2-page	0
		Inserts	1.5
Promotions	85	Giveaways	3
		Deals	62.4
		Offers	7.5
		Prizes	0
		Sales	1.5
		Rewards	0.8
		Early Bird	5.3
		Happy Hour	3.8
		Coupons	23.3
		Discount	6.1
Visuals of Cannabis	46.7	Actual pictures of the cannabis plant	18
		Graphic pictures of the cannabis plant	35.3

Social Media used in the advertisement	36.5	QR Codes	4.5
		Shopping with your phone for cannabis products	2.3
		Social media icons	36.1
Holiday Themes	20.3	Halloween	6
		Thanksgiving	0
		Christmas	9.8
		New Year	4.5
Bravado	10.6	The use of words or awards	5.3
		Slogans	1.5
		Quotes	3.8
Words related to cannabis	25.6	420	0.8
		Joint	0.8
		Marijuana	4.5
		Cannabis	19.5
		Hemp	0
Appeals	2.3	Sex	0
		Humor	2.3
		High Society	0
Colorado logo appears in the advertisement	9.3		

Table 4

*Overall percentages of categories and subcategories*

Category	Percent	Subcategory	Percent
Size		Full page	27.1
		1/2 page	21.4
		1/4 page	26.2
		1/8 page	16.1
		1/16 page	6.6
		2-page	1.7
		Inserts	0.9
Promotions	83.5	Giveaways	4.3
		Deals	57.2
		Offers	6.1
		Prizes	0.4
		Sales	1.3
		Rewards	2.6
		Early Bird	5.2
		Happy Hour	5.7
		Coupons	18.8
		Discount	8.0
Visuals of Cannabis	47.3	Actual pictures of the cannabis plant	18.3
		Graphic pictures of the cannabis plant	37.5

Social Media used in the advertisement	32.8	QR Codes	2.6
		Shopping with your phone for cannabis products	1.3
		Social media icons	32.6
Holiday Themes	20.5	Halloween	5.7
		Thanksgiving	0.9
		Christmas	10
		New Year	3.9
Bravado	17	The use of words or awards	14
		Slogans	0.9
		Quotes	2.2
Words related to cannabis	30.8	420	3.5
		Joint	0.4
		Marijuana	10.9
		Cannabis	14
		Hemp	2.2
Appeals	7	Sex	2.2
		Humor	3.9
		High Society	0.9
Colorado logo appears in the advertisement	7.8		